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White Center at a crossroads: Home-grown experiment in renewal

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The last time Hava Jazvin cared about her community, it broke her heart. The Bosnian war shattered it, claiming the life of her father in the process. So when she relocated to White Center five years ago, she hesitated before thinking of it as home.

"At first, I did not like White Center," she said. "It seemed very unsafe and unpleasant. But I was a refugee. I had no choice about living there."

White Center is King County's poorest and most crime-ridden neighborhood, with 10 percent of its population living in public housing. For years, scores of immigrants have thought of it as a way station until they could earn enough to move up and out. But many are now determined to stay and raise their families here.

A harmonic convergence is taking place in White Center, manifesting a new destiny for immigrants to claim the disrespected neighborhood as their own. Recent investments totaling hundreds of millions of dollars are upgrading housing stock, building new schools and fashioning a new neighborhood ripe for the taking.

That is all playing out against the backdrop of White Center's improbable new status as a social laboratory. A national foundation has selected the neighborhood to test a theory in urban renewal that compels residents, not outsiders, to map its future so that they, not outsiders, will benefit from the changes. The idea is that immigrants will develop both an emotional and a financial stake in White Center's fate.

White Center at a glance

Population:
21,957

Race/Ethnic group:
White: 51.4 percent
Asian: 21 percent

"I have spent so much energy to make changes in White Center that I want to be a part of them," said the 51-year-old Jazvin, who has no plans to leave.

With the foundation as catalyst, state and local officials, employers and philanthropists who overlooked White Center in the past suddenly have assumed a cultlike interest in pulling it out of its chronic depression. They regularly meet with residents to listen to their visions for White Center, then huddle to come up with strategies to carry those out.

"If we are successful, gentrification will not occur and White Center families will achieve wealth right here in White Center," said Bob Watt, Boeing's vice president for government and community affairs and one of the leaders devoting time to White Center. "All of the right elements are in place to make a big difference — the right attitude, a fair share of resources and an engaged community."

Ultimately, though, the measure of success may hinge not on the level of commitment but on the level of crime. Agustin "Junior" Arevalo sees it every time he works late at his father-in-law's bridal shop, Decoraciones Ely, on White Center's main commercial strip, 16th Avenue Southwest.

"There are a lot of drunk guys hanging out on the street," said Arevalo, 26, who emigrated from Mexico in 1990 and lives in Bellevue. "I wouldn't live in White Center, not the way it is now, not with the crime that goes on around here. I'm going to be a parent someday and I don't want to raise kids in a neighborhood like this."

While many residents are frustrated, wanting Seattle to annex the neighborhood from King County and put more patrol officers there, only a small portion of the funds now going into White Center are earmarked for police programs.

Even without that direct help, though, police officials in both Seattle and King County say their crime-fighting efforts in White Center — challenging as they are — have a better chance of success with the broader, underlying changes that are now taking place.

White Center's gritty past

Lying just outside Seattle's southwest city limits, White Center is an ethnically diverse and geographically isolated pocket of unincorporated King County. Its sneering nickname — "Rat City" — has competing origins, referring either to the "rink rats" who

Hispanic/Latino: 12 percent
African American: 6.2 percent
Two or more races: 4.9 percent
Hawaiian/Pacific Islander: 2.5 percent
American Indian/Alaska Native: 1.7 percent

Median household income:

White Center: \$40,000
King County: \$53,000

Adults without high-school diploma:

White Center: 27 percent
King County: 10 percent

Families below poverty line:

White Center: 15 percent
King County: 8 percent

Single-parent households:

White Center: 37 percent
King County: 25 percent

Number of people speaking languages other than English:

Vietnamese: 1,774
Spanish: 1,720
Cambodian: 1,133
Tagalog: 342
African languages: 331

Source: Annie E. Casey Foundation analysis of 2000 U.S. census

crowded the local skating rink, the military's Relocation and Training (RAT) Center that operated during World War II or a past rodent infestation.

The area used to be a Boeing-employee enclave, full of small houses built in the 1930s for the single men recruited from across the country to work there. More recently, it has been a gateway for refugees and other immigrants, and the neighborhood's main business district reflects that, boasting a Salvadoran bakery, Vietnamese delis and restaurants, several Cambodian groceries, a Mexican bridal shop and more.

They share White Center's downtown with a smoke shop, adult novelty stores, pawnshops and pubs. Locals say that a few of the bars draw tough crowds at night.

Bob and Joanne Houk's side-by-side sign and screen-printing businesses — Center Sign Shop and Screen EFX — have fronted 16th Avenue Southwest for 11 years. The Houks said they welcome the recent changes that have turned White Center into more of an immigrant enclave.

"If every store around me becomes Cambodian or Vietnamese or Mexican or whatever, I would stick right here in the middle of them," said Bob Houk, who is white. "I just enjoy the heck out of them."

Joanne Houk, who moved to the neighborhood in ninth grade, said she now calls White Center the "International District" and it "is becoming real close-knit, more than ever before."

Yet White Center, which is unincorporated, has no organized voice, such as a city council or a mayor.

The 1999 grant from the Baltimore-based Annie E. Casey Foundation, which could pump \$750,000 a year into White Center for seven more years, is designed to organize a community voice and prepare immigrant families to become rooted.

The foundation's "Making Connections" program has deputized more than a dozen volunteers with neighborhood ties to become community leaders. Designated as "trusted advocates," their job is to look out for the interests of White Center's immigrant groups, which include Southeast Asians, Eastern Europeans, Mexicans and sub-Saharan Africans.

They also serve as go-betweens for the residents and those positioned to respond, such as the King County Housing Authority, the Highline School District and the Department of Social and Health Services.

In about two years, the housing authority plans to break ground on a \$235 million redevelopment of White Center's public-housing project, Park Lake Homes, replacing 568 units with a new subdivision of 900 to 1,100 homes. About a third of the new homes will be sold to people of modest to middle incomes.

The Casey program is helping prepare immigrants to become those buyers. The Refugee Federation Service Center, a Making Connections partner, is helping clients establish or repair credit, while saving for a down payment.

"We want to make sure that our people have an opportunity to buy a fair percentage of the homes that will be available," said Ngy Hul, executive director of the center.

If the housing authority is to successfully market the homes, White Center has to be a desirable place to live. With that in mind, the housing authority bought the troubled 335-unit Mallard Lake apartment complex from a private partnership last December and also purchased a nearby 98-unit apartment complex, The Cones, considered an even greater menace.

At both places, the agency introduced tenant screening and strict house rules that are effectively pushing out the troublemakers. The Mallard Lake complex was renamed Coronado Springs and The Cones became Arbor Heights.

"It's about investing in a neighborhood, and that neighborhood does not end at the boundaries of Park Lake," said Stephen Norman, housing authority executive director.

From her rocking chair, Shirley Johnson has looked out the window of the Coronado Springs apartment where she has lived for 16 years and witnessed things a woman with a heart problem ought not see: drug deals, assaults, the trash bin where a mother incinerated her dead baby's body. Built on the edge of a tranquil pond, the complex had such a terrible crime problem it was featured on the reality TV show "Cops."

"I look out now and all I see is my beautiful lake and all I can hear are the sounds of ducks and frogs," said Johnson, 74.

The people are heard

On the edge of the redeveloped Park Lake housing project, the Highline School District is using \$17.9 million in bond money from a 2002 levy to build a new elementary school — one of two being built in White Center.

In determining what it should offer, the district asked parents — in nine different languages — what they wanted. They responded: homework tutoring, a safe after-school

Making Connections

Making Connections is a 10-year investment by the Annie E. Casey Foundation to improve conditions for families in tough or isolated neighborhoods. Efforts are concentrated around:

- Creating ways for families to earn a decent living and build assets.
- Building close ties with family, neighbors, faith communities and civic groups.
- Having reliable services close to home.

In 1999, White Center was selected as a testing ground, along with neighborhoods in Denver; Des Moines, Iowa; Indianapolis; and San Antonio. More recently, neighborhoods were added to the project in Hartford, Conn.; Louisville, Ky.; Milwaukee, Wis.; Oakland, Calif.; and Providence, R.I.

Source: Annie E. Casey Foundation

place, and a venue to meet other parents. When White Center Heights is christened next fall, it will be open daily until 10 p.m., Principal Greta Salmi said.

"This is a community of really committed parents, many of whom are here because they have escaped war or the economic deprivation that follows wars," Salmi said. "They have big dreams for their kids but not a lot of background on how to get there."

Residents are also asking for construction apprenticeship-training programs so that unemployed locals will benefit from the building of the new housing and schools.

Mabel Fatialofa-Magalei, a trusted advocate and co-pastor of the White Center Samoan Assembly church, said many resident requests are being carried out.

"It's wonderful to see things come around that we had a say on," she said. "If something comes up and we don't like it, we can't say we haven't had our chances."

When DSHS announced it was moving its offices into a vacant grocery store at a busy intersection, residents let it be known what they did — and did not — want.

"The community told us it didn't want a big-box welfare office full of white people who didn't look like them or talk like them," said Dennis Braddock, DSHS executive director. "They wanted something oriented more toward their cultures."

Making Connections sent Fatialofa-Magalei and four other community members to two California cities with unconventional human-service offices. With those as models, the community asked the agency to build a center with welfare offices on a new upper floor and street-level storefronts for small retailers and organizations serving ethnic communities.

"That was the vision we had, and the state came through," Fatialofa-Magalei said. The estimated \$7.5 million center is scheduled to open in May.

Another spinoff of the Casey grant is the White Center Community Development Association. This year, it sponsored several events to boost White Center's image — a weekly farmers market throughout the summer and a Cambodian new year's festival in April.

"The Casey Foundation grant has been a big driver," said Peggy Weiss, vice president of the association. "The foundation has brought more than money to White Center. It has brought the ability to leverage support from all kinds of places."

"It lends legitimacy. It gets calls returned. It has us exhausted. It has us exhilarated."

Savun Neang, a father of two who emigrated from Cambodia in 1984, said he is showing his confidence in the community and trust in its people by not installing security bars

around the windows of his computer store, Sane Technology, two blocks from the Houks' dual storefronts.

"I came to White Center because there was already Cambodians here," he said. "Many of us have stayed and more want to stay but they won't if the crime continues." If it can overcome its crime problems, Neang said, White Center could become a model.

"More than 40 languages are spoken here," he said. "We have a chance to show everyone that people of many different backgrounds can care for one another and live together in a peaceful way."

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